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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5263

INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6573

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 9249

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5105

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1225

RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 2527

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHDC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003521

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS
NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/01/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV TH

SUBJECT: SUPREME COMMANDER TELLS AMBASSADOR MILITARY WILL
REMAIN OUT OF FRAY AND PREDICTS PAD WILL SOON FALTER

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. In a December 1 meeting, Supreme Commander General Songkitti Jaggabartra predicted to the Ambassador that the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) would not be able to sustain its hold on the nation's key international airports for more than a few days. Songkitti again stressed that the Thai military would not intervene in politics; persistent coup rumors were spread by those who wanted society divided. The Supreme Commander agreed with the Ambassador's call for the Thai government to prepare for threats by protesters to other key parts of Thailand's infrastructure such as utilities and seaports. The police were best prepared for such defense, Songkitti said.

12. (C) Comment. Songkitti's assessment that the PAD will have trouble maintaining support and will likely vacate the Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang airports is welcome after days of gloomy predictions regarding options for clearing the PAD from the Thailand's primary international gateways but likely overly optimistic. Even if the government regains control of the airports soon, it will be key for the government to demonstrate the backbone and the ability to take a stand against future protests by the PAD. The military's continued insistence that intervention in the political arena is not an option is a positive step in the effort to potentially resolve the underlying divide that had plagued Thai politics.
End comment.

ARMY SEEKS SOLUTION VIA BOTH SIDES STEPPING BACK

13. (C) During a December 1 meeting with Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF) Supreme Commander General Songkitti Jaggabartra at RTAF Headquarters, the Ambassador stressed that the only way to resolve the crisis would be through a political solution. Songkitti said the Thai military had for months stated that a coup would not be an option but many people refused to believe this. The Supreme Commander told the Ambassador the military would not intervene; rumors of a coup were being spread by those who wanted to create divisions within society.

RTG MUST PREPARE FOR OTHER THREATS

¶4. (C) The Ambassador stressed to Songkitti that the RTG must prepare for future threats to key infrastructure. The Ambassador raised reports that the PAD may disrupt Thailand's seaports and energy and communication utilities. The government must have a plan in place to protect this critical infrastructure, otherwise international confidence in Thailand would suffer even more, the Ambassador told the Supreme Commander. Songkitti agreed with the Ambassador's view and pointed to the Royal Thai Police as the arm of government that should maintain domestic law and order. The police trained for riot control situations while the military trained to defend the nation from external threats. It should be easy to keep protesters from returning to Suvarnabhumi once the PAD vacated as access routes could be easily controlled by airport guards and police, Songkitti said.

¶5. (C) In the interim, Songkitti expressed confidence in the ability of the Royal Thai Navy (RTN) to protect commercial aircraft operations Utapao from disruption. RTN Commander Admiral Khamtorn Pumhiran had assured Songkitti that Utapao would not be closed by the PAD.

PAD LIKELY TO WEAKEN SOON

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked whether the RTARF assessed that the PAD could continue to maintain their hold on the Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang airports. Songkitti doubted this was possible. According to RTARF estimates, approximately 2,000 protesters were located at Suvarnabhumi and

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approximately 800 were located at Don Muang. Songkitti said there were only 500 PAD supporters at Government House and said it was likely they would depart the grounds soon. While PAD leaders had asked supporters to vacate Government House in order to reinforce the airports, Songkitti predicted many would go home instead. Of the 500 at Government House, maybe 200 would continue the protest at the airports. Songkitti pointed to the King's birthday parade December 2 and to other events for the King's birthday December 4-7 as factors that would further decrease the PAD's numbers. Those who respected the King would likely leave the airports in the coming days and the mob would not continue, Songkitti said. As such, the Supreme Commander predicted that the PAD will have left the airports within two or three days.

¶7. (C) Songkitti predicted that the PAD would not be able to sustain protests if the Constitutional Court decided to dissolve the ruling People's Power Party as many predicted would happen in the coming days. PAD leaders had based the protest on their call for Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat to resign. PAD leaders were set in their opposition to the Prime Minister because he was former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's brother-in-law. If Somchai lost his position due to the Courts ruling, PAD supporters would likely go home. The leaders of the movement could not change the reason for the protest every month or so and expect supporters to maintain their commitment to the protest, Songkitti said. The Thai people would understand that PAD leaders were spreading falsehoods if the leaders tried to set new conditions for the protests.

¶8. (C) Comment: Although welcome, we believe Songkitti's assessment on the PAD may be prematurely optimistic. The PAD has given no indication that either a Constitutional Court decision or the King's birthday would be cause for abandoning its blockade of the airports. Moreover, the departure from Government House likely is a purely tactical move to help bolster numbers at the airports, and appears to be designed solely for the nighttime hours, when the PAD has been subject to several grenade attacks.

JOHN